

Abbas Akhavan, *Study for a Garden*, Delfina Foundation,
London, October 8 — November 20, 2012

Martine Rouleau

Number 77, Winter 2013

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/68383ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les éditions esse

ISSN

0831-859X (print)

1929-3577 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Rouleau, M. (2013). Review of [Abbas Akhavan, *Study for a Garden*, Delfina Foundation, London, October 8 — November 20, 2012]. *esse arts + opinions*, (77), 78–78.



Abbas Akhavan, *Study for a Garden (Fountain)*, 2012.

photo: Hydar Dewachi, courtesy of the artist, The Third Line, Dubai & Delfina Foundation, London

Abbas Akhavan, *Study for a Garden*

Delfina Foundation, London
October 8—November 20, 2012

How many waking hours does one spend trying to keep nature at bay? We clean, sweep, and tidy up without giving much thought to the tasks that give us a sense of control over our environment and our own bodies. *Study for a Garden*, the outcome of Abbas Akhavan's ten-week residency with the Delfina Foundation, is an uncanny reminder of this primal urge for dominance.

The tone is set right inside the front door of the derelict domestic building where Akhavan devised his installations, with a row of hedges partially blocking visitors' access. The controlled invasion of the garden doesn't stop there, as the work is deftly scattered throughout the house, from basement to second floor. The garden has crept indoors, and what might constitute a lovely sight when glimpsed from one's living room window is somehow disquieting when it sits within the actual room. Such is the case with a tangle of ivy growing straight out of a gaudy period carpet in one of the first-floor rooms. Even more unsettling is the sprinkler that occupies the top-floor room, sending wave after wave of water to seep into the ancient linoleum floor.

For Akhavan, whose work has often relied on displacing benign domestic objects to highlight that they are imbued with meaning—cultural markers, indicators of power relations, mechanisms of control—it is a deceptively simple strategy to bring the garden indoors. Having carte blanche to engage with the space as he wished, the artist interpreted the remaining traces of past inhabitants—wallpaper, carpeting, furniture—as a foil for a different approach to displacement.

Just as nature colonizes the former living spaces, lending them new connotations, other elements hint at something darker. An angled table (where a watering can and wet cloths rest uneasily) sits under a stained ceiling, and a constant drip of water falls into a bucket placed on the ground. We register all the details and the mind jumps to the conclusion that water damage in the room above must have caused this drip. Beyond the chain of domestic cause and effect is a reference to waterboarding, a form of torture that requires more or less the same elements: tilted table, container filled with water, cloths.

The interventions appear discreet; the effect on our imagination unfolds in time rather than leading to immediate interpretations. In this way the works are like nature itself, slowly taking over the spaces that we don't claim for ourselves with the daily ritual of cleaning, sweeping, and tidying up.

[Martine Rouleau]



Jennifer Bailey, *Danielle in the Studio (from New Girls)*, 2011.

photo: courtesy of ICA, London and Bloomberg New Contemporaries

Bloomberg New Contemporaries

Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London
November 27, 2012—January 13, 2013

What makes a young artist good? The number of exhibitions and prizes dedicated to identifying the elusive promise of youth are numerous and wildly variable. *Bloomberg New Contemporaries*, in its third year at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, specializes in supporting emergent art practice from British art schools. Selected by Cullinan Richards, Nairy Baghramian, and Rosalind Nashashibi from more than twelve hundred submissions, this year's selection of twenty-nine young artists presents a surprisingly cohesive aesthetic. There is a freshness to this edition, an overall sense that the works were selected for their simplicity, their lack of artifice.

For instance, the naïve paintings and collages of Freya Douglas-Morris might hint at a post-colonial comment, but it's their childish aesthetic that dominates. Jan May's naïve paintings eschew the commentary altogether in favour of pleasing shapes on solid backgrounds. Max Ruf's large-scale abstract paintings are highly saturated with acetone on Xerox and toner pigment, yet Tyra Tingleff achieves as great an impact on a smaller scale with her thickly layered oil paintings. Emanuel Röhs's work presents a lighter approach as he opted to partially cover his canvas with strategically placed smudges of watercolour, letting the weave of raw linen feature prominently.

There is a wide selection of moving-image works, ranging from documented social experiment, such as by Simon Senn, to the aesthetic manipulation of found footage in Salome Ghazanfari's *Boxer (Young Marble Giants)*. *Untitled (Ready for a Fight)* by Anita Delaney provides a surprising injection of humour and aggression with a fixed camera trained on a barely clothed individual, fists raised in a boxer's stance. The threat is somewhat softened by the fact that this person is smoking through a hole in the handkerchief that obscures his or her face.

Some works challenge disciplinary boundaries, existing between installation, sculpture, and painting. Lauren Godfrey's *Spaghetti Alle Vongole* looks like a placard lying face down on the floor, taking up space in a playful way, as does *Tomorrow we will run faster, stretch our arms farther*, a silk banner covered in tiny characters and stretched between sculptural poles. Jennifer Bailey's work also stands out. Displayed on and around a simple plywood table, her digital photograph on fabric, oil on board, and mixed media installation appears like a small exhibition in its own right. The diversity of materials and styles doesn't detract from the tactile quality of her installation *New Girls*, a collection of crude ceramic objects reminiscent of artefacts. Her works draw you in; they almost ask to be handled.

If *Bloomberg New Contemporaries* is any indication of the work that will emerge from art schools in the years to come, it might mark a welcome return to an exploration of materials and a lighter mood.

[Martine Rouleau]